

Thinking about Land Acknowledgements

The first time I heard an Indigenous person give a land acknowledgement, about ten years ago, it was a deeply personal acknowledgement of the land and its history, part of a project to encourage local people to dig into the archives of their own community. Nobody knew the names of the Indigenous people who lived there before English colonization began. Nobody thought about the fact that more than a few street or place names derive from Indigenous languages. Over the next few years I heard other Indigenous people acknowledge the land, often in their own languages. The practice helped to ground listeners in place and to think about the ongoing impact of colonization on all of us, including those whose ancestors had no part of those histories.

Seemingly overnight, land acknowledgements became trendy. Everyone was doing them, often asking someone else to give them the “correct” language. When I see these performances, I do not question the sincerity of the speaker, but I do question their analysis. What does it change to utter words you don’t know how to pronounce?

The fundamental concept of land acknowledgements is good, inviting us to name the people who lived here before, to acknowledge the ongoing impact of colonization, to connect these histories to Indigenous communities in the present, and to remind us that we have a responsibility to protect the land, air, and water for future generations.

In collecting the resources presented here, my assumption is that you are interested to learn more about land acknowledgements and care about using them in a good way. There are no hard and fast rules for how to do it “right.” One person will tell you this, other person will emphasize something else. Since I’m a historian who has spent time on the early history of the place where I live and teach – the middle Connecticut River Valley in Massachusetts – my style is to offer primary sources and other readings, along with links to what others say about land acknowledgements.

The [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#) has a land acknowledgements page. It presents context and information for users to read before they can link to the official statement, which was co-developed by the UMass Native Advisory Council and respected advisors from local Tribal Nations over “a year-long consultative and deeply collaborative process.” The [Native American & Indigenous Studies Initiative](#) at Brown University makes a similar statement about process.

See also resources posted by the [Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian](#).

Primary Sources

Pynchon, John, Carl Bridenbaugh, and Juliette Tomlinson. [*The Pynchon Papers, Vol. 2: Selections from the Account Books of John Pynchon, 1651–1697*](#). Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol. 61. Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982.

- The whole book is useful but to complement research on 17th century Indian deeds from this region, see especially [List of Different Kinds of Furs Traded by the Pynchons](#) and [List of Cloth Terms in the Account Books](#).

Wright, Harry Andrew. [*Indian Deeds of Hampden County : Being Copies of All Land Transfers from the Indians Recorded in the County of Hampden: Massachusetts, and Some Deeds from Other Sources, Together with Notes and Translations of Indian Place Names*](#). Springfield, MA: [n.p.], 1905.

Articles

Nash, Alice. “[Quanquan’s Mortgage, 1663](#).” In Marla R. Miller, ed., *Changing Winds: Essays in the History of Hadley, Massachusetts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.

Weidner, Genevieve. “[History of the Metawampe Statue at the University of Massachusetts Amherst](#)” n.p. (2019).

Books

Brooks, Lisa Tanya. *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip’s War*. Henry Roe Cloud Series on American Indians and Modernity. Yale University Press, 2018.

Land Grant Universities

High Country News, [Land Grab U](#) – resources on the Land-Grant College Act of 1821 (aka the Morrill Act)

Repatriation

Land acknowledgement is related to the issue of **repatriation**, which affects the disposition of human remains and cultural heritage dug up from the land and often kept by universities or museums for study. For a quick introduction, see [Journeys to Complete the Work: Stories about Repatratations and Changing the Way We Bring Native American Ancestors Home](#), a comic by Sonya Atalay, Jen Shannon, and John G. Swogger. Read it online or download it for free.